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# International student migration: a comparison of UK and Indian students' motivations for studying abroad

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This paper breaks new ground in its comparative analysis of two international student migration (ISM) streams, one from the Global South to the Global North (India to developed Anglophone countries), and the other within the Global North (UK to North America, Europe and Australia). These two ISM movements reflect different positionalities within the global system of international student movements, and hence necessitate a critical perspective on the assumptions behind such a comparison, which questions the dominance of 'knowledge' about ISM that derives from 'the West' as a theoretical template. Two methods are employed to collect data: an online questionnaire survey of UK and Indian students who are, or have recently been, studying abroad; and in-depth interviews to UK and Indian international students. Motivations for studying abroad are remarkably similar in the questionnaire results; more subtle differences emerge from the interviews.

**Keywords:** international student migration; UK students; Indian students; North America; motivations to study abroad

## Introduction

The last few years have seen a rapid increase in international student migration (ISM) and there is now an extensive literature on the topic, including several books and edited collections (Alberts and Hazen 2013; Baas 2012; Bilecen 2014; Brooks and Waters 2011; Byram and Dervin 2008; de Wit et al. 2008; Gürüz 2008; King and Raghuram 2013; Robertson 2013; van Mol 2014; Waters and Brooks 2011).

However, very little of this existing research involves explicit comparison, except at the statistical level of comparing quantities and trends of internationally mobile students; the case-studies set alongside each other in edited collections are rarely analysed comparatively in any depth. In his comparativist manifesto for migration research, FitzGerald (2012) stresses the potential for comparative studies to reveal the interplay between factors in sites of migrant origin and destination that in turn help to explain divergence and convergence amongst a range of processes and outcomes. Whilst FitzGerald's manifesto is set within a critique of assimilation theory and what has been labelled 'methodological nationalism' within migration studies (cf. Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), our approach to comparativism explicitly acknowledges the power geometries that shape relations between countries, including the international flows of people (migrants, students, tourists etc.), trade, media and culture – what McMichael (1990) calls 'an incorporating comparison'.

Within the global system of ISM, these relations of power tend to produce a dichotomy between the Global North as countries of destination, and those of the Global South as origins of students. Whilst this reflects the obvious global geography of inequalities in opportunities for higher education, built upon histories of colonialism and underdevelopment, and ongoing post-imperial economic and geopolitical networks of power (Hansen 2014), it is an

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oversimplification: there are substantial ISM flows between countries of the Global North, and within the South too (IOM 2013, 52-70). Above all, we need to be aware that what seems at first sight to be a straightforward or ‘equal’ comparison, actually reflects inherent geometries of power in which the ‘assumed referent’ is ‘the West’ (Chakrabarty 1992) or, put another way, the ‘correct template’ is naturally read as the Global North as the historically default location of theory and knowledge (Spivak 2009).

In this paper we compare two national groups of study-abroad students – from India and the United Kingdom. These two ISM flows are drawn from very different positionalities and relationalities within the global flows of ISM. India is the world’s second-largest (after China) source country for ISM. A former British colony, India is a country with an expanding youth population that is highly educated. With increasing investment in STEM fields in both education and the labour market, India has a fast-growing middle class and is one of the emerging economic powers within the current global knowledge economy. In contrast to India as a sending country, the UK is the world’s second-largest (after the USA) receiving country for ISM and a former colonial metropole; yet it also ‘exports’ students to other countries, especially the USA. Our comparison of the backgrounds and motivations of the two groups of students starts from the returns from online questionnaire surveys and then proceeds with insights from face-to-face interviews.

Throughout the ensuing discussion, we need to bear in mind continually what we have said above about geohistorical positionalities, and exercise caution to ensure we do not reproduce such a stereotyped analysis. The comparison between UK and India is further problematised by the tools of data collection. The Indian survey was designed on the basis of the UK survey; hence the stage is already set with the use of ‘Global North’ to locate the knowledge gained from the Global South context. With these caveats in mind, we proceed with a comparative analysis to explore what we can learn about the abstraction that is the global system of ISM.

We specify the following research questions for our study:

- Do the school-background characteristics of students, and their motivations for going abroad to pursue higher education, differ across different types of origin country, taking the UK and India as examples?
- What can we learn about the ‘global system’ of ISM from these two cases?

We shall describe the research methods used to gather data to respond to these research questions presently. First, we give a brief overview of the field of ISM.

### **ISM: defining and theorising the field**

ISM is an important yet hitherto under-appreciated component of global migration. For example, it was only in 2008 that the International Organization for Migration’s periodic ‘world migration’ reports recognised the importance of ISM in global migration dynamics (IOM 2008, 105–123). In recent years, global ISM has been growing at about 8% annually, much faster than the total international migration. The ‘stock’ of international students (4.5 million in 2014) has more than doubled since 2000 (2.1m) and more than quadrupled since 1985 (1.1m).<sup>1</sup> Table 1 shows the five top destination countries where Indian and UK students were studying abroad in 2012. Indian students are oriented to the Anglophone countries of the

Global North – US, UK, Australia and Canada; UK students are split between overseas destinations such as the US and Australia, and European countries, including Ireland, France and Germany.

[Table 1 about here]

How can ISM be theorised? Drawing on earlier attempts to theorise ISM (Brooks and Waters 2011, 10–18; Findlay 2011; Findlay et al. 2012; King and Findlay 2012; Raghuram 2013) we nominate four theoretical domains as having particular salience to our study. These also find their place as summarised options within the survey questionnaire and themes to be explored in the interviews.

The first theoretical frame is ISM as a *subset of highly skilled migration*. From a macro-economic perspective, the ‘host-country’ motivation to attract foreign students is articulated through the country’s strategy for improving the supply of highly qualified human capital into their domestic labour markets – the case in Canada and Australia. The flipside of this process – brain drain from the source countries – is countered by a discursive shift to ‘brain circulation’, including ‘brain return’ to the origin country. Note that this debate on brain migration is linked to binary economic locations in the Global North (receivers) and South (senders). Current literature draws on the more fluid language of human capital to highlight the circulation of skills, knowledge and capital, which is in line with the attraction of ‘desirable’ highly skilled migrants into receiving countries. Often the directionality of this movement is seen to be South to North or North to North, though this is shifting as there is more research that examines other mobilities of highly skilled labour (Ortiga et al. 2017)

From the human-capital perspective of the individual, ISM can be seen as a *career-enhancing investment* – a rational strategy in order to compete better in the domestic labour market of the origin country following return ‘home’. It could equally be seen as the first step towards a high-income international career, perhaps in a global corporation, or as part of a life-plan project of emigration and international mobility (Findlay et al. 2017b). On a wider scale, therefore, ISM contributes importantly to the creation of an international labour elite of skilled professionals, including academics, managers, business owners and international civil servants. There is, however, a more conceptual issue as to whether *students* can truly be regarded as highly *skilled* since they have not yet, in most cases, entered the labour market to demonstrate their skills. Szélenyi (2006, 183) suggests that only graduate and postgraduate students form an integral part of the highly skilled.

Secondly, we see ISM as both *a product and an underlying mechanism of the globalisation of higher education*. As Sidhu (2006) has emphasised, the commodification of higher education is the consequence of global processes in which higher education is being sold within a global market place (see also Findlay et al. 2017a). In fact, higher education is an issue of policy and practice across multiple scales – global, national and local. In the cases of both Indian and UK students, there are circumstances where the ‘local’ fails to cater for the needs of students: either there is too much competition for limited places, or the ‘value’ being ascribed to degrees from certain countries and from particular universities within them is perceived to be insufficient, or the desired programmes of study are not on offer (Yang 2003). Therefore students seek higher education in a broader geographical field – either elsewhere in the country or abroad.

The third conceptual frame considers ISM as part of *global youth mobility cultures*, where the freedom to travel and to ‘explore’ different places and cultures is seen as a desirable lifestyle attribute for middle-class youth. This conceptualisation takes its inspiration from the post-2000 mobilities paradigm in sociology, anthropology and human geography, which privileges the *movement* of people, things and images over their static distribution in settlements, classes and other ‘containers’. A notable paradox is that the main protagonists of

the ‘mobilities turn’ (principally Cresswell 2006; Urry 2007) scarcely mention international student mobility as a relevant contemporary example of their genre of work.

Under the youth mobilities approach, ISM is seen partly as an end in itself: as an exciting personal experience, an ‘adventure’. The study-stay abroad becomes a life-stage ‘consumption good’ corresponding to a ‘rite of passage’. Whilst the academic qualification retains its importance (at least to the extent that it is important not to ‘fail’), the key objective is the sensory and cultural experience of being in another place/country, with its different climate, scenery, historical patrimony, recreational opportunities, food and music traditions, and new opportunities for social encounters and friendships. For the most part this construction of youth mobility has been limited to movement of youth of the North-North directionality. The limited discussion of the South-North youth mobility examines it as a means of conspicuous class consumption of the ‘new’ and growing ‘middle classes’ of India and China (Waters 2006). In some cases where youth and highly skilled mobility are entangled, the sense of adventure is not seen as a ‘natural’ activity of the non-white body. It is instead read as the new middle class aspiring to attain or perform an act of ‘white privilege’, as if leisure mobility is only the remit of the Western traveller (Roos 2017).

As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have pointed out, the greater the diversity of places that students have experienced, the greater their agency in terms of creative and individualised self-identification. The mobile student distinguishes him/herself from the routine modernities of a static student life by celebrating the international stage on which their study history and personal biography have been built. Following Bourdieu’s (1986) well-known ‘forms of capital’, the mobile student’s international experience is embodied in a specific form of cultural capital which we can tentatively call mobility capital (Murphy-Lejeune 2002) or, perhaps, transcultural or intercultural capital. This perspective also tends to construct internationally mobile students as an elite category, which leads us to the fourth framing – the importance of a *class analysis*.

Despite the proclaimed outdatedness of ‘class’ as a crucial category in contemporary fluid and mobile societies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Urry 2000), many authors insist on the continued salience of social class as an analytical construct. Writing about Asian migrations, Fielding (2016, 128) asserts that, without a social-class analysis, migration risks becoming a ‘chaotic concept’. He goes on to state that ‘class location ... determines the choices that individuals have when engaging in migration. Location in a higher class gives the person more choice about leaving, more choice about destination, and more choice about the manner of insertion into the destination society’ (2016, 128).

There is abundant evidence not only that access to university education is socio-economically selective in most societies but also that access to an *international* education from the general pool of students is biased in favour of the more privileged, wealthy and highly educated classes, including those families who are able to put their children through private, i.e. fee-paying, schools (King et al. 2011). For Europe, the *Euro Student* report, based on large-scale survey data across several countries, concluded that ‘students from low-income families make substantially less use of the opportunities for studying abroad than do those from families with higher income’ (Schnitzer and Zempel-Gino 2002, 115). However, social class is not a static concept: class boundaries are mobile and permeable, and social status, especially of the elite and middle classes, is constantly being remade. In the context of Hong Kong students’ migration to Canada, Waters (2006) found that, within a general scenario of *embourgeoisement* and rising participation rates in higher education, studying abroad, especially at prestigious Western universities, was one way that the elite and upper-middle classes could maintain their distinction from the rising and expanding middle class.

## Survey methods

The research results presented here derive from two separate though interlinked projects. First we describe the projects and then the research instruments.

The first project, entitled ‘Motivations and Experiences of UK Students Studying Abroad’, was funded by the UK Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and carried out in 2008–09. It surveyed UK-origin students undertaking complete degree programmes (bachelor, master or doctoral level) abroad, chiefly in North America, the main destination for UK out-moving students, but also in Australia and several European countries. The research employed two survey methods: an online questionnaire survey (553 respondents) of UK students enrolled in universities abroad; and face-to-face interviews (n=64) with UK students abroad, chiefly in the US. Full details of the various research methods used in the project, including the questionnaire and interview schedules, are given in Findlay and King (2010, 46–67).

The second project was a doctoral thesis on Indian student migration (Sondhi 2013). Although this was an independent study, some of its methods were deliberately patterned on the UK study in order to ensure cross-project comparability. Hence a similar online questionnaire was used to elicit responses from Indian students studying for a degree in another country (n=157). Face-to-face interviews were undertaken with 43 Indian students who were either studying abroad in Canada (n=22) or had returned from studying abroad to India (n=21). In addition, 22 interviews were conducted in New Delhi with the parents of students who were studying abroad. The Indian online survey and interviews were carried out in 2010–11.

For the purposes of this study, we define an international student as someone undertaking ‘degree mobility’, whereby they follow an entire degree programme (either undergraduate or postgraduate) outside his or her country of origin.

### *The online questionnaire*

As mentioned in the introduction, comparison is not an unbiased process. Hence, before we compare the results of the two surveys, there is a need to consider the underlying assumptions of which shape the language and the construction of the factors/categories themselves, and how they impact on the narratives constructed and ultimately on the production of knowledge on Indian international students and the wider ‘global system’ of ISM.

The compilation of the online questionnaire benefited from previous experience with surveying UK Erasmus students who were abroad in Europe (Findlay et al. 2006; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003). The Erasmus questionnaire was then modified to apply to students who were abroad for entire degree programmes. The UK survey collected information on the following themes:

- life at present (courses followed, part-time work if applicable, evolving identity);
- school background (public or private, grades achieved, languages taught or spoken);
- decision to study abroad (check-list of factors to be rated on a four-point scale from ‘very important’ to ‘not applicable’);
- experience of studying and living abroad (friendship patterns, evaluation of the study-abroad experience, problematic aspects);
- respondent information (age, gender, nationality/ethnic heritage, parents’ education and occupation).

Given the focus of this article, we will mainly concentrate on comparing, across nationality and gender, the responses to questions relating to motivation for study abroad. Four key

questions about motivation, derived from in-depth scrutiny of existing literature and theorisations on ISM motivations, were listed in both surveys:

- I was determined to attend a world-class university.
- I want an international career and this was a first step towards it.
- I saw studying abroad as a unique adventure.
- My family was very keen for me to study abroad/in a particular country.

In the UK survey two other questions were included:

- Rising fee levels in the UK made me explore other study locations.
- Limited course places in UK universities hampered my ability to study my chosen degree subject.

As a result the survey was designed with a British student population in mind, where the focus was on individual expectations, desires and trajectories. When the survey was considered for use in the Indian case, some motivations were amended based on the contextual knowledge at the time. In the Indian survey, the following question was added:

- I saw study abroad as a first step towards living outside India after graduation.

The methods of distribution for the questionnaire survey could not be matched, but we believe this is unlikely to affect the results significantly since both survey strategies elicited responses from a range of countries roughly in proportion to the available statistics on the distribution of Indian and UK students studying abroad.

The UK questionnaires were forwarded to students by the large numbers of universities which were contacted where it was known, or there was good reason to believe, that there were sizeable clusters of UK students. A small number of universities returned large or moderate numbers of completed questionnaires (Trinity College Dublin, Harvard University, New York University, University of Southern California, University of Sydney); questionnaires were also returned in small numbers from students in many other universities (see Findlay and King 2010, 52–53 for the full list). The Indian questionnaires were distributed via a more varied range of channels. The survey was hosted on the SurveyGizmo web platform and distributed to selected university international offices, Indian student associations in the US and Canada, personal networks and Facebook (see Sondhi 2013, 62–64).

### ***Interviews***

Face-to-face interviews were carried out with over 100 British and Indian students. Most of the British students were interviewed in the north-eastern United States and in California. The Indian students were interviewed at universities in the Canada, in the Toronto area and (for returnee students) in New Delhi. For logistical reasons of time, distance and cost, it made sense to cluster the interviews in key university cities.

The interviews were semi-structured, built around a number of key themes and questions, but with opportunity for the informants to tell their ‘stories’ in their own way. We sought to cover the same thematic structure as the questionnaire, with the added dimension of opening up a discursive space for gendered experiences to emerge. Most interviews lasted around one hour, and were recorded and transcribed, subject to the usual consents being given. Given the large numbers of interview narratives collected, we must be selective in quoting case-studies

and interview extracts, seeking to give as representative a view as possible, based on our knowledge of the wider sample of informants and the broad themes that consistently emerge.

Students were contacted via a variety of access routes: personal networks of the researchers and their colleagues, universities' international offices, student associations, Facebook groups, social events and some snowballing. The campus environment makes it relatively easy to set up meetings in neutral spaces such as coffee-bars and other common socialising areas.

All the interview samples were gender-balanced. There was, however, one key difference: a much higher proportion of Indian students – about three-quarters – were postgraduate students; for the UK students, the undergraduate/postgraduate split was more even. This represents the reality of these two ISM flows and is not a result of sample bias.<sup>2</sup>

### **Online survey results: motivations for study abroad**

The questionnaire survey yields relatively robust data for comparing selected characteristics about the two groups of students, especially their main motives for deciding to pursue higher education abroad. For this preliminary analysis we compare questionnaire results from 553 UK students studying in the US, Ireland, Australia, France and Germany (265 males, 288 females) with 157 Indian students in the US, Canada, the UK, Australia and Germany (87 males, 70 females).

[Table 2 about here]

The first comparative table (Table 2) shows two features of the students' background: the type of school attended and the main source of funding for their university studies. The markedly different school backgrounds are clearly evident: whereas none of the Indian students had attended the national state-school system, more than half of UK students had followed the state system. Nevertheless, privately educated UK students accounted for one third of the survey respondents, nearly five times the share that these schools account for in the total UK secondary-school population (7%). If international schools (which are usually fee-paying) are included in the non-state educational sector, then four out of ten UK students come from the private or 'independent' sector (which includes the counterintuitively named 'public schools'). In India, private schools are the norm for the children of upper- and middle-class parents.

On the other hand, there is a rather striking similarity between UK and Indian students' main source of financing their studies, with the figures distributed in a parallel way between parental support, grants and bursaries, and self-financing through part-time work and savings. The data here are not split by gender as the patterns are similar between male and female students.

[Table 3 about here]

Table 3 presents the core data for our analysis of motivations for studying abroad, based on the main hypothesised reasons evident from previous literature and our own thinking about the UK and Indian situations. Taking the four-point response scale of 'very important', 'important', 'not important' and 'not applicable', we plot two sets of results, those for 'very important' in the top part of the table, and those for the combined ratings of 'very important' and 'important' in the bottom half of the table. There are some striking similarities in the figures, both between countries and between genders, and also some interesting differences. Perhaps the most remarkable similarity is the consistency of responses to the first factor, 'I was determined to study at a world-class university', rated uniformly at upper 50s on the 'very



important' score and in the 80s for the combined 'very important' and 'important' categories. The percentages are almost identical between male and female respondents across the board.

The second factor listed in Table 3 refers to the route that studying abroad provides for accessing an international career. Here there are noticeable differences between the Indian and the UK students, but minimal variations by gender. Whilst 56% of Indian students saw this as a 'very important' factor, only 34% of UK students did. This 22 percentage-point difference narrows to only 6 when the 'very important' and the 'important' scores are combined, indicating that, for UK students, this operates more as a secondary factor in their thinking whereas, for Indian students, it functions alongside the desire to attend a top university as a prime factor. The Indian survey data also indicate that there is a good deal of interest in using the student-visa route as a means of facilitating longer-term migration out of India. One in five Indian respondents saw this as a very important factor governing their decision to study abroad, and nearly twice that number when the 'important' category is added, with male students recording higher scores than females on this factor. To conclude on this point, it seems that the well-established Indian global business and professional diaspora provides an exemplary and attractive setting for Indian students to want to settle abroad. The circulation of ideas of lifecourses that involve study, travel and work opportunities outside of India present the Indian youth with clear avenues to locate themselves in a global labour market while simultaneously being connected to India's flourishing and globally linked labour market. British students' envisioned career trajectories are less diverse and more likely to involve a return to the UK's globally connected labour market, due to their desire to return home after a period of 'adventure' abroad, as well as potentially due to a lack of knowledge and ability to pursue career and lifecourse in a newer settings.

Seeing study abroad as a 'unique adventure' also scores highly for both genders – slightly higher for UK than for Indian students. 'Family encouragement' to study abroad is the fourth factor common to both questionnaire surveys and records lower frequencies of 'very important' and 'important' ratings. The only gender contrast here is the higher rating recorded by UK women for this being 'very important' (15% vs 8% for men), suggesting that female students are more likely to be sensitive to the encouragement of their families than men.

The two remaining elements in the table are those included only in the UK questionnaire. The survey was implemented at a time when there were ongoing discussions about substantially increased fee levels in English and Welsh (but not Scottish) universities – initially to £3,000 and then to £9,000 per year. This factor was seen as 'very important' for one quarter of respondents (but 30% of females). Limited course places in the UK for the chosen subject of study constituted a relevant factor for 19% ('very important') and 43% ('important' added) of UK respondents, again with higher scores for female respondents.

### **Mapping motivations: insights from interview data**

The statistical comparison of UK and Indian students' outward mobility revealed that the motivations for studying abroad are rather similar, almost uncannily so. At first sight, this is rather surprising because one might expect different motivations on the part of students coming from different socio-economic and cultural contexts. All four main motivation factors – to study at a world-class university, to access an international career, to experience a unique adventure, and family encouragement – show similar patterns of cross-national response, also by gender. The interview narratives help us to unpack the structures that lead to these apparent similarities. As we shall see, this exercise points to particular framings of ISM by youth and their parents that reflect a differential balance between individual initiative on the one hand, and the wider social imaginaries of elite and middle classes on the other.

### *Attending a ‘world-class’ university*

According to Findlay et al. (2012, 120) and Yang (2003), the internationalisation of higher education has proceeded alongside increased differentiation of the university system across the globe. Certain countries are able to position themselves as purveyors of a world-class university education. They do this partly out of their long-standing reputation for academic quality and prestige and partly by reference to international league tables that universities scramble to increase their rankings on, despite misgivings about the true meaning of such metrics-based tables (Jöns and Hoyler 2013).

For the consumers of a world-class education, there are several benefits. The most obvious one is a leg-up in the career stakes. It is well-known that a degree from ‘Oxbridge’ or from Harvard and other ‘Ivy League’ schools, or from one of the French ‘*grandes écoles*’, can be an entry-point to the best careers in government, academia and other key professions in the respective countries. As Brooks and Waters (2011), Findlay et al. (2012), Waters (2006) and others have shown, it is a means of distinguishing oneself in the pursuit of superior status and difference, not only for the individual but also in terms of reproducing and enhancing the family’s social class position. The presumed locations of such ‘knowledge’ are countries in the Global North, though this assumption is now being challenged (Ortiga et al. 2017).

In the language of upward social mobility, Indian students, like Waters’ (2006) Hong Kong Chinese students, look to accumulate cultural capital by circumventing the challenges of the local higher education system. Studying abroad is a pragmatic response to structural barriers within the Indian higher education system. The concerns here are twofold. The first is socio-demographic: a rapidly growing and youthful population with middle-class aspirations has led to an increase in demand for higher education, putting pressure on the existing structures of education and making the system more competitive than previously, especially for the country’s top universities and specialised higher education institutions. Study abroad becomes a means to mitigate the fear of failure resulting from the possibility of being unable to access the best local higher education.

The second issue concerns the rapidly evolving nature of the Indian economy and its neoliberal turn with increasing privatisation, stalled public funding for higher education (particularly for non-STEM fields), and the establishment of private universities and campuses built by overseas universities (Agarwal 2009). The opening up of the Indian economy to the world has led to demands from the Indian labour market for highly skilled and trained workers within the STEM fields, particularly IT, and for expertise in business studies, commerce and economics.

Whilst the existing system has supported demand in STEM subjects, it lags in matching demand for business studies education, including specialised training in subsectors within this general field. This is despite having access to some of premier Masters’ level programmes in India through its reputed Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs). In the following quote, Tarun (MBA student in North America) describes his personal take on the need to go abroad, picking up several points raised above:

I come from an engineering background... I worked on a project in [names multinational corporation] for four years. That’s when I met people from Europe, Canada and the US... they told me that there’s a good education over here. It’s not like lecture-based as happened in India, it’s more interactive... And then after a time I thought I should go for my MBA. At the time I started to look for good schools in different parts of the globe. I didn’t want to stay in India because I wanted to get a global perspective. And how I ended up in Canada was I was more involved in CSR [corporate social responsibility], very much involved in non-profit. And [names university] has a very high rank in the world for non-profit and CSR.

Tarun's quote reveals his desire to acquire a global perspective, which is understood to be gained through international travel; and that CSR, as part of an MBA degree, was not offered at Indian universities. In fact, only a handful of globally reputable North American institutions offered an MBA with a specialisation in CSR. The programme provided Tarun with the opportunity to gain the highly valued 'global' experience of working and studying in another environment. This is much sought after in multinational corporations and in banks with international presence.

For UK students, the targeting of a world-class university abroad was a reflection of a risk-spreading strategy and, for some, the specific desire to mitigate the fear of failure to get into Oxford or Cambridge by applying instead or as well to other universities that have a global brand recognition, especially from a UK perspective (Brooks and Waters 2009). Susan, an MBA student at a prestigious university in California, put it like this:

I decided I wanted to go overseas, and I would study for an MBA. I wanted an MBA which people would not think was from some tiny university in the middle of nowhere, [I wanted] an MBA which was actually recognised in the UK. So I knew I had to go for one of the big American universities. I chose just Harvard initially because that's the biggest name for business schools in the UK... But then I thought that's a risky strategy, to only apply there... so in a second round I also applied to Berkeley.

As Susan's interview extract shows, the 'MBA' image produced by a combination of accumulated fame and the marketing strategies of universities and MBA schools has successfully permeated the everyday consciousness of the elite and semi-elite students who aspire to a career in business, especially international business (Waters and Brooks 2009). Her belief was that a qualification from a top American university was the only alternative to a top UK university and that she needed to avoid getting a degree from 'some tiny university in the middle of nowhere' – presumably here referring to both the UK and the US.

In the above discussion, the image of North America as the ideal site for certain globally-relevant fields of study is evident. Both the UK and Indian students circumvent the local structures where they may not be able to access the top universities, by choosing a high-ranking institution in North America. Hence, within the global system of ISM, not only is there a separation between countries of the global North and South, but also a separation of countries and regions of the North by the disciplines in which they are seen to be 'world-class'.

### *International career*

Closely allied to the desire for a world-class university experience was the deployment of study abroad as a deliberate strategy for enhancing access to an international career. Our student interviewees, both Indian and British, thought that an internationally recognised degree from a prestigious university would allow them to compete better in an internationalised labour market, partly through the intrinsic value of the wider experience of living and studying abroad for one or several years. They believed that employers would value the fact that job applicants had deliberately set out to be more adventurous in this way, and that this increased self-confidence and sense of adventure would carry over into the world of work and business.

For UK students, a common pattern was to combine an undergraduate degree in the UK with a postgraduate degree in North America: this was seen as a way of opening the door to an international career, including the idea of staying on in the country of study. Amongst the Indian students, informants pointed to the relatively more merit-based system of employment hiring in the US, Canada, Australia and the UK, which provides Indian graduates with the opportunity to secure jobs commensurate with their educational qualifications, skills and experience. This was contrasted with the obstacles and constraints intrinsic to the Indian labour

market, which was still seen as very hierarchical – based on class, gender and ‘connections’ (Radhakrishnan 2009).<sup>3</sup> In the following interview extract from Nisha (female, Social Sciences PhD student in Canada), we hear a rather typical story of the challenging experiences in the Indian labour market interspersed with repeated episodes of emigration to places where work and study opportunities within non-STEM fields were seen as more accessible and relatively more equal than in India.

I left India in 2000 when I moved to the US for my Bachelor’s. In 2004 I went back to India for a year... I wanted to test the waters. But I was extremely unhappy with the salary and my treatment in the workplace... and the value which my degree and knowledge were given. I moved back to Canada. I completed my Master’s and now work simultaneously as a consultant for several NGOs and immigrant servicing agencies and for my PhD. Canada has really accepted me for who I am; my skills and expertise have been valued enormously... My research focuses extensively on India and ideally I would like to return there one day, although I am worried about the limited opportunities outside academia, with my arts background... as well as the lack of respect and poor treatment I may face in a non-academic setting, and the poor pay in government sectors.

Whilst Nisha was keen to return to India, even after one failed attempt already, other participants saw study abroad as a more pre-planned step towards settling abroad – some with a specific target as the study-abroad country, some with a more open mind geographically (see Findlay et al. 2017b). In the following quote we see how the combination of a UK first degree and then a postgraduate degree abroad is an ideal choice, given the intention of Sarah, the interviewee, to work outside the UK.

I will most likely be working overseas, so if that’s the case I need to go to an institution that has an international reputation. I had no interest in continuing at Oxford or Cambridge. So I only considered [names well-known Australian university] because I didn’t consider any other university in Australia to be world-renowned. A lot of the literature I was reading was written by people at [names university].

In the case of both UK and Indian students, then, not only do degrees from particular ‘prestige’ universities carry the internationally recognised weight of global recognition, but also universities are embedded in local and national contexts. This means that the students generate social and human capital that is both local and global, and gives them potential access to labour markets both in the country/region where their chosen university is situated, and in the international/global market; for some, that prestige can be carried back home should they decide to return to seek employment or for personal reasons.

### *Adventure*

The third common motivation, with rather similar survey values between the UK and Indian samples (Table 3), is the opportunity that study abroad offers for travel and adventure, albeit within the relatively ‘safe’ environment of the university setting. This desire is partly embedded, again, in the drive to distinguish oneself from others. But it is also a desire to learn about another culture, to find out what one is capable of and to belong to the ‘mobile’ or ‘travelling’ youth culture. Those going abroad to study are intrinsically aware that they are migrating to another place with a different culture and, on the whole, they are keen to learn and to gain tacit knowledge of that new setting. Hence study abroad is seen as an opportunity for experiential learning; a new departure as an individual separate from their family, previous friends and the ‘known’ environment of the home country in general. Richa, an Indian postgraduate student in the UK, described how her experience at an international summer

school was a turning-point in her thinking – about herself and the ‘global exposure’ she was seeking:

I went on summer school during my undergraduate [degree], and I had a great time! I realised that there was something in my life that was missing: this global exposure. When you are travelling in India you are travelling with your family, your friends... But when you are studying with other people, hanging out with them, living, eating and talking with them everyday, you get to know their cultures. You learn about lives outside of yourself. So this was a changing-point in my thinking – about why I should go out [of India] to study.

Similarly, Fiona (UK undergraduate studying in Australia) articulated her desire to ‘experience another culture’, as well as harking back to her father’s spending his ‘gap year’ in Australia:

I just wanted a big change. I’ve always been interested in Australia because my dad lived there during his gap year when he was my age, in between school and going to university... So I’ve always been interested in coming here to study; I wanted to experience another culture, and everything.

What we see in these and other quotes is the desire to carve out a unique identity for oneself, based on rising to the challenge of being internationally mobile and gathering international experience – what Murphy-Lejeune (2002) has aptly described as ‘mobility capital’. Sometimes this is facilitated by family links and assistance – as Fiona, above, hints at, and as we explore further in the next subsection – but on other occasions it is more a reflection of the wish to create a narrative of full independence.

It is also clear that prospective internationally mobile students not only construct for themselves the identity of the ‘youthful adventurer’ but they are also consumers of marketing images produced by different countries’ tourism agencies and by the universities themselves. Universities’ marketing strategies build the image of the international student as a ‘youth traveller’: even the ‘Asian learner’ can be an explorer (Singh and Doherty 2008). These marketing packages put out by universities’ international offices are complemented by global media portrayals – of the quaint English village or life in ‘London town’; of the American dream, typified by images of New York, Florida or California; or of the laid-back Australian lifestyle, with its surfing beaches and ‘barbies’. Of course, the spaces that students do end up occupying lie in the interstices between the ‘imagined’ and ‘real’ everyday life of the host country, and ‘campus life’, especially for those who stay in university accommodation, can be far removed from the grittier aspects of life in New York, Toronto or London.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Family links***

Although we treated this as a separate factor in the survey, in practice it intersects with other elements in the decision to study abroad, not least in the way that this can make it a family decision rather than an individual one.

From the interviews, the family dimension emerged in three separate ways. First, it can be clearly seen as an ‘investment’ by the family in order to ensure a successful future for the student son or daughter. Second, this investment may also be geared to the reproduction or advancement of the family’s social class and cultural capital (cf. Waters 2006). Third, study abroad may be mapped on to family migration and holiday patterns of the present or past generations: both the British and the Indian diasporas have a global distribution that provides a range of possible student migration opportunities, mainly within the Anglophone world of the former British Empire. The following two quotes illustrate different aspects of the ‘family narrative’ of ISM: the first reflects the way that destination choice continues a history of family holidays, followed by the support of the mother in scouting out opportunities on the ground.

We often came here [to the US] as a family when I was growing up. We'd come out in the summer for three or four weeks... I just loved the mentality and the whole thing about America. You know, that vibe you get when you are here, it's so positive and like, you know, anything you want you can get it. I really thrive on that. So when it came to making important decisions, like when I was doing my GCSEs, at the age of 15, 16, I thought of going to university in America, I wanted to do something different... So I did a lot of research; Mum and I went and researched universities in America. We decided on location, where I wanted to go, East or West coast, nothing in the middle... so we narrowed it down a lot... I wanted vigorous academics, I liked the competitive environment... (Britney, UK undergraduate at university in Southern California).

For the Indian example, we draw on a parent interview with Sheeba, a mother in New Delhi whose daughter had just finished her Master's in the US. It gives an original insight into the parental influence over their offsprings' international education, which rarely comes out in studies of ISM that are based solely on student responses and narratives.

My brother studied abroad, also my husband. And I always had this idea that my children... I wanted my children to do their graduation [undergraduate studies] in India and then go [abroad] for their postgraduate... to get that international exposure. My son's going to graduate in Law here in India, then LLM abroad, hopefully in Oxford or somewhere like that. My daughter has just finished her Master's in the US.

Maybe we risk making too much of this point, but it is noticeable that, in both the above quotes, it is the mother who is the dominant figure in guiding the children's educational pathways abroad. The role of the maternal figure in the household, and their level of education, has been shown as a common factor amongst international students, particularly women (Findlay et al. 2006; Sondhi and King 2017). In the Indian survey results, significantly more women than men had mothers who were educated to first degree level (Sondhi and King 2017, 1313-1314). There is a future strand of research here to examine the intergeneration transmission of human capital between mother and child within the context of ISM.

## Conclusion

Let us return to the two research questions in order to review and evaluate the key findings. The first question was about variation in the *background characteristics and motivations for studying abroad across the UK-India comparison*. Based on results from the online questionnaire surveys, summarised in Tables 2 and 3, we find remarkably little difference. For both sets of students (Indian and British), four key factors pushed respondents to study abroad (Table 3):

- the desire to attend a prestigious or world-class university;
- the acquisition of an international education in order to build a successful career as a highly skilled graduate, either in the home country or in the global marketplace;
- the wish to study abroad as an imagined unique adventure and a potentially transformative experience; and
- a desire to continue a history of family travel and experience or aspiration to study abroad.

The respondents' ratings for each of these four factors (as 'important', 'very important' etc.) proved to be surprisingly similar between British and Indian students, and with minimal gender differences, too. The main differences, modest in scale, were between Indian respondents'

greater emphasis on careers, and British students' slightly higher rating of the 'adventure' factor.

In this comparison the UK is the explicit and visible referent, rather than the often critiqued position of Europe/Western contexts being the implicit and silent template against which countries/cases from a non-Western context are compared. Either way, such comparisons are not unbiased. In this paper, we do not make claims of neutrality. Rather, we see this as an opportunity to examine those assumptions in order to make visible both the positive and negative implications of using the UK as a referent on which the decision factors were initially molded. In doing so, we attempt to 'bring' India in with a clear recognition of the histories which show the geometries of power in and across the current sites within the global system of ISM, as well as its current location within the 'global knowledge economy'.

Drawing on the categories and terminology of the UK ISM context allowed us to relocate the discussion of Indian students from the discourses of '(under)development' whereby student migration is seen as a livelihood strategy or as a means of accumulating money for remittances (Baas 2012; Chopra 2005). By contrast, the discussion of 'Western' international students is often about individual aspiration and accomplishment, including references to travel-based tourism and 'gap years', which are seen as a break from formal learning. An alternative reading of the meaning of 'travel' for middle-class students from the Global South is indicated through the language of a kind of conspicuous consumption that can only be accomplished while at the historically significant colonial centres. Meanwhile, both groups of students give equal credence to the notion of the world-class university as the target place to study, both from the perspective of the Global North and the South.

We acknowledge that these terms need to be further unpacked, though that is beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose of this discussion has been to use comparison to examine the underlying assumptions of ISM motivation categories. With these points in mind, taken together, these results speak directly to the existing theoretical framings of ISM as a sub-type of high-skilled migration through a quest for a world-class education, as a part of adventure-oriented youth mobility cultures, and as a mechanism of class difference and elite reproduction based on family narratives, experiences and aspirations. All these frames illustrate the ways in which ISM unites local with global dimensions of higher education within a broader globalisation scenario.

To sum up: this paper has employed a multi-method, multi-sited comparative research design to explore a dual comparison of UK and Indian student migration. It is one of the first such studies of its kind. Given the scale and variety of ISM worldwide, enormous scope exists for further comparative work, particularly that which brings students into spaces which are very different from those left behind.

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are from the OECD's education database. See OECD (2015, 29–32) for a summary or the OECD 'education at a glance' website for more details. Note that the enumeration of international students is far from straightforward, for two main reasons. First there are definition and measurement problems: international students are variously recorded by their 'foreign' citizenship or by their country of habitual or prior residence. Second, there is the issue of whether short-term 'exchange' students (such as Erasmus or 'year abroad' students) are included in the totals: on the whole they are not, but it is not always clear. For further discussion on data sources for ISM, see de Wit (2008).

<sup>2</sup> For further details on the interview surveys, access strategies and other logistical aspects of the fieldwork, see Findlay and King (2010, 24–26, 66–67) and Sondhi (2013, 66–82, 250–252).

<sup>3</sup> These discriminatory obstacles are prevalent in the Indian public service and in non-IT workplaces. In fact, women make over 30% of the technical labour force within Indian IT firms, compared to only 16% in the UK (Raghuram et al. 2017).

<sup>4</sup> This is an aspect of the international student experience that we explore in another paper, especially from a gender perspective (Sondhi and King 2017).

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Table 1. Indian and UK students abroad: five main host countries, 2012

Indian students abroad		UK students abroad	
US	92,597	US	9,060
UK	22,155	Ireland	2,106
Australia	16,150	France	2,013
Canada	9,582	Australia	1,678
New Zealand	6,845	Germany	1,499

Source: OECD *Education at a Glance* (<http://oecd.org/edu/education-at-a-glance-2014-indicators-by-chapter.htm>).

Table 2. School background and financial sources of Indian and UK students studying abroad (% data)

	India	UK
Type of secondary school attended		
• state school	0	54
• fee-paying (private) school	98	33
• international school	2	6
• other	0	6
Source of financing for study abroad		
• parents	41	38
• grant or bursary	22	21
• self-financing	22	21
• bank loan	8	7
• employer	3	2
• other	4	11

Source: Authors' survey data.

Table 3. Online survey results: percentage of respondents rating study-abroad decision factors as 'very important' or 'important'

Decision-making factors	India			UK		
	M	F	MF	M	F	MF
'Very important'						
• world-class university	58	58	58	54	56	55
• international career	58	54	56	32	36	34
• unique adventure	47	40	44	48	52	50
• family encouragement	15	13	14	8	15	12

• rising fees in the UK	-	-	-	19	30	24
• limited courses in the UK	-	-	-	14	25	19
• migration from India	22	14	20	-	-	-
‘Very important’ and ‘Important’						
• world-class university	82	82	82	88	88	88
• international career	74	74	74	68	69	68
• unique adventure	84	84	84	87	89	88
• family encouragement	31	30	31	27	28	27
• rising fees in the UK	-	-	-	27	42	34
• limited courses in the UK	-	-	-	37	49	43
• migration from India	43	33	38	-	-	-

*Source:* Authors’ survey data.